Potential Interest Of the Elderly In Active Euthanasia

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SUMMARY

As part of a larger study, elderly applicants to institutions and elderly residents of the community were questioned on their potential interest in active euthanasia. Of these, 19 percent and 23 percent respectively said they would want a lethal injection. A further ten and nine percent respectively said they would want a lethal pill, if ever hopelessly ill. Most elderly community residents who would prefer to carry on as best as they could nevertheless thought that alternatives should be available to those wanting them.

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THERE IS increasing interest in the issue of withdrawing life-supporting procedures (passive euthanasia) or the use of procedures to hasten death (active euthanasia) in hopelessly ill patients or their families who request such a course. At least three books were published on the subject in 1975.[1-3] There have been several reports in the newspapers[4, 5] and a number of discussions and comments have appeared in professional journals.[6, 7] Gilder's introductory comment[6] is worth quoting: "One would have to be pretty unimaginative not to realize that euthanasia is just around the corner for some population group somewhere on this planet. There

has been more and more talk about it and a gradual softening of resistance to it, strongly resembling the process that took place in regard to abortion in so many lands."

There have been several surveys of British[3] and American[8-10] physicians on this subject. Travis[10] surveyed all physicians in Iowa by mail questionnaire and obtained a 50 percent response, of whom 44 percent said they frequently omitted life-prolonging medications or procedures in managing terminal patients, and only six percent said they never had done so. Travis comments that this is the first documentation of the assumption that this is a common practice.

Russell[3] reviews the findings of public opinion polls on the issue of euthanasia. The American Institute of Public Opinion (Gallup poll) conducted a poll in 1939 asking "Do you favor mercy deaths under government supervision for hopeless invalids?" Forty-six percent of respondents were in favor and 54 percent against (page 85). Younger people were more in favor than were older people. In a similar poll by the British Institute of Public Opinion in 1939, 69 percent of respondents endorsed the principle of euthanasia. In a U.S. Gallup poll in 1947 involving a similar question (page 102), the proportion supporting the principle of legal euthanasia had dropped to 37 percent. By 1973, a Gallup poll in the U.S. reported that public approval of mercy killing had increased to 53 percent (page 198). A Gallup poll of Canadians in 1968 found that 45 percent thought that mercy killing should be legal and 43 percent that it should not be; the remainder apparently expressed no opinion (page 199).

None of the public opinion polls cited had asked respondents about their potential personal interest in using euthanasia if they should ever be in the relevant situation. Nor have we found any report of such an inquiry among groups of sick or disabled individuals. As part of a larger study of long-term care for the elderly in our region, we included questions on their potential personal interest in active euthanasia when interviewing elderly applicants to long-term care institutions and elderly people living independently in the community.

Method

The general methodology of our study is described in our first published report of the findings.[11] Between June 1973 and June 1974, 115 applicants or new admissions to long-term care institutions who resided in Frontenac or Lennox-Addington counties were interviewed. All were over age 65 (applicant group). Interviews were also carried out in the winter of 1974-75 with 141 people over age 65 living outside of institutions. These were a representative sample from the assessment rolls in Kingston, Napanee and five of the townships in the two counties (independent group).

Following questions concerning the respondent's feelings and state of mind, we asked each respondent the following question: "Suppose you had a very serious illness which very much limited what you would do, or which caused you much pain and suffering and made your life a misery. The doctors could offer no hope of improvement, and you felt that you would rather die than continue living under these conditions. Also, suppose that social customs were different from now, so that you were free to carry out any of the choices I shall list. Which do you think you would choose?

A. To carry on as best you could
B. An injection that would cause you to die quickly and painlessly
C. A pill that would cause you to die quickly and painlessly, so that you could take it whenever you decided to
D. Other (specify)"

The answers obviously cannot be considered as any assurance that the respondent *would* make the choice indicated if he were in the actual situation described. Nevertheless, we felt that they would provide a worthwhile indication of thinking on this subject among the elderly.

In interviews with the independent group, we added a question for those who had not indicated a potential interest in active euthanasia for themselves by selecting any of the appropriate options in the question above: "Do you believe that *other people* in that situation who would want the injection or pill should be able to obtain it openly and legally?"

Findings

As seen in Table 1, a little more than half of the applicant group and a little less than half of the independent group made the unqualified choice of carrying on as best as they could if

faced with the hypothetical situation quoted. However, 19 percent and 23 percent respectively said they would choose the lethal injection, while a further ten percent and nine percent respectively said they would want to have the lethal pill in their possession. Thus, almost a third in the independent group expressed interest in actual or potential direct action to hasten death if they were in the hypothetical situation in question. This proportion was very similar in the applicant group, whose actual situation tended to be closer to the hypothetical one than was the case in the independent group.

Of those in the independent group who were asked if they believed the alternatives stated should be available to other people in that situation openly and legally, 54 percent said yes, 26 percent said no, and 20 percent didn't know or declined to answer.

Discussion

One cannot assume that the respondents would follow the courses of action suggested by their responses in this survey. Nevertheless, we believe that it is important to record that almost a third of a representative sample of people over age 65 living independently in the community expressed a potential interest in receiving active euthanasia if ever faced with a hopeless illness or state of disability, and that the majority of the others believed that those who would want active euthanasia in that situation should be able to obtain it openly and legally. Also, these proportions were very similar to the applicant group – who had much more disability than the independent group. To our knowledge, these are the first data of this kind obtained from a representative sample of any age group in the population, or from any sick or disabled group.

It seems likely from our findings that an appreciable proportion of hopelessly ill people would actually avail themselves of some form of active euthanasia if the means to do so were openly and legally available. ◉

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TABLE 1

Responses to Question on Potential Interest in Active Euthanasia

Choice	Applicant Group No.	Applicant Group %	Independent Group No.	Independent Group %
To carry on as best as he could	65	56	64	46
A lethal injection	22	19	33	23
To have a lethal pill to take when desired	11	10	13	9
To carry on, but specified that would reject life-prolonging procedures	7	6	9	6
Vague, don't know, no answer	10	9	22	16
Total	115	100	141	100